



Congress of the United States House of Representatives

Testimony for the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Full Committee Hearing – Member Day September 10, 2019

PLEASE RESPOND TO:

- ☐ 2134 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-3704
(202) 225-6416
- ☐ 405 EAST 8TH AVENUE, #2030
EUGENE, OR 97401
(541) 465-6732
1-800-944-9603
- ☐ 125 CENTRAL AVENUE, #350
COOS BAY, OR 97420
(541) 269-2609
- ☐ 612 SE JACKSON STREET, #9
ROSEBURG, OR 97470
(541) 440-3523
- ☐ defazio.house.gov

Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony as part of the Committee's bipartisan Member day. I commend my colleagues on the Committee for their efforts to improve the lives of our nation's veterans and would like to address two important issues that have impacted veterans in my district and across the country.

First, I call your attention to the Roseburg VA Health Care System's (RVAHCS) persistent recruitment and retention issues.

Recent staff shortages in the RVAHCS forced the abrupt closure of the Roseburg Emergency Department (ED) and conversion to an Urgent Care (UC) facility. According to RVAHCS Director Keith Allen, Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN) 20 senior leadership directed RVAHCS to implement a conversion from an ED to a UC facility because of "shortfalls in qualified providers to staff Emergency Department ancillary services, such as laboratory services, radiology services and respiratory services."

Staffing shortages also limit the new UC operations to Monday through Friday, not seven days a week. There is no community care UC facility in Roseburg, so veterans have no access to immediate medical care after 8:00 p.m. or on weekends.

I am gravely concerned the RVAHCS will continue to suffer from recruitment and retention problems without appropriate intervention. I have no doubt that VA care for veterans in my district will ultimately be degraded if these issues are not addressed.

I wrote to Secretary Wilkie urging him to be actively engaged in helping the RVAHCS and VISN 20 maximize all pay flexibilities. I have also urged him to relay information to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) about how consistent locality pay limitations have negatively impacted VA's efforts to recruit providers in Douglas and Lane Counties.

The RVAHCS is not alone in its struggle to recruit and retain top-tier health care providers. Rural VA health care systems across the country face similar problems.

The health and wellbeing of our veterans is at stake. I urge the Committee to take a more thorough look at what Congress can do to help alleviate the persistent issues that create hurdles for veterans who need care. We must work harder to ensure that RVAHCS and other rural health

care systems have the tools they need to recruit and retain high quality providers to meet the healthcare needs of our veterans.

Secondly, I urge the Committee to take up legislation to authorize VA work-study student positions in congressional offices.

In my district, we manage a high-volume of complex veteran constituent casework. Previously, veterans attending school could work as VA work-study students and be paid to work in congressional offices to help veterans with VA services and benefits.

The stipend veterans received as work-study students encouraged them to participate in the work-study program in congressional offices for substantial amounts of time, sometimes years. Veterans in my congressional district gained invaluable experience and insight into VA casework and issues. Their prior military service also helped them more effectively communicate with veterans, and they were determined advocates for fellow veterans.

One of my former work-study students, Justin Carney, worked in my district office from May 2005 through January 2008. He had to suspend his work-study position when he was deployed, but he returned to my district office to continue helping veterans as soon as he returned to the U.S. Justin now works for the VA in Los Angeles, where he has been for almost ten years. He has held a number of positions there, including Veterans Service Representative, Congressional Analyst, Management and Program Analyst, and now serves as a Coach.

Another of my former work-study students, Whitney Couture, has worked for me for more than ten years and has assisted hundreds of veterans with their casework issues.

In 2009, VA bureaucrats terminated this highly successful program. They said VA work-study students were never authorized to work in congressional offices, despite the fact that they had been working in congressional offices for more than twenty years.

Terminating the program was a no-win situation: student veterans lost out on a tremendous opportunity to develop job skills while helping fellow veterans, veterans in need of assistance lost key advocates in congressional offices, and congressional offices lost invaluable assistance in responding to the needs of veteran constituents.

Despite my efforts to reverse this wrong-headed decision, the program remains terminated. The VA has said that new legislation would have to be enacted to authorize work-study benefits for veterans helping veterans in a congressional office.

As you well know, a significant portion of congressional casework is for veterans. In my district office, I currently have two full-time staff members managing casework for veterans.

I believe there is no more appropriate way to honor our veterans and their service than by training their fellow veterans to assist them with their VA benefits.

That's why I will reintroduce legislation this Congress to make it possible for veterans to again work in congressional offices as work-study students. I urge the Committee to give this

important bill full consideration so we can reauthorize this successful program and once again allow veterans to help veterans.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on these and other important issues.